MY MOTHER:

A TALE FROM HUMBLE LIFE IN ENGLAND.

By JOHN ASHWORTH.

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NOTE.

THE reader may rest assured that these Narratives are substantially true, as hundreds in Rochdale and its neighborhood can testify. The names given are the real names of the persons mentioned, and many of them are still alive.

For a long time I have been a visitor amongst the poor and the outcast, and four years ago opened for them a place of worship, called the "Chapel for the Destitute," to which large congregations have gathered of the *really destitute*. Some of these Tales have been given in my Annual Reports, and their favorable reception induces me to offer them for a wider circulation.

I am a tradesman, and make no pretension to literary ability. If He whom I desire to serve condescends to use me as a medium of good to others, my earnest wish will be realized. To Him my prayer has been, "HOLD, THOU, MY RIGHT HAND."

J. ASHWORTH.

Broadfield, Rochdale,
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MY MOTHER.

JUST on the outskirts of Rochdale, on the side of the highway leading to Manchester, at a place called Sparth, there formerly stood a large stone table, supported by three thick stone pillars. Here, in by-gone days, country farmers brought their milk, and were met by their town customers with pitchers: owing to this custom it was designated the Milkstone. Underneath it many a school-boy had taken shelter from the storm, and on the top of it many a weary traveler laid down his heavy burden.

Amongst the many thousands that made this stone a resting-place, two have a special interest.

One cold winter day, a young man was seen going from Rochdale towards Marsland Workhouse with an old man on his back: the young man's strength being exhausted, he set down the old man in a sitting posture on the Milkstone. While both were resting, the old man began to weep most bitterly. "You may cry as hard as you like," said the young man, "but to the Workhouse you shall go, if my legs can carry you; for I will not be burdened with you any longer."

"I am not weeping because thou art taking me to the Workhouse, my son, but because of my own cruelty

to thy grandfather. Twenty-five years since, this very day, I was carrying him on my back to the Workhouse, and rested with him on this very stone. He wept, and begged I would let him live with me the few days he had to live, promising to rock and nurse the little children, and do anything that he could; but I mocked his sorrow, turned a deaf ear to his cries and tears, and took him to the Workhouse. It is the thought of such cruel conduct to my poor old dead father that makes me weep." The son was amazed, and said,—

"Get on to my back, father, and I will take you home again, for if that be the way, my turn will come next: it seems it is weight for weight. Get on to my back, and you shall have your old corner, and rock the little children."

One hot summer day, a poor woman was seen toiling up the hill called Fletcher Round, with a flannel "piece" on her back. A little boy was walking by her side. On reaching the Milkstone she laid down her heavy burden, and leaning on the "piece" for support, she wiped the sweat from her face with her check apron. With a look of affection, the boy gazed into the face of his mother, and said: "Mother, when I get a little bigger you shall never carry another 'piece.' I will carry them all, and you shall walk by my side."

On that very day the painful fact flashed into the mind of that little boy that he was the poor child of poor parents—the young son of an humble, toiling, kind, and affectionate mother. But as he grew bigger and stronger he redeemed his promise, and carried the

"pieces" up Fletcher Round, and on to Mr. Whitworth's warehouse at Sparth without calling at the Milkstone to rest. His love for his mother was deep and lasting, and from his own pen we have the following sketch of her life,—"THE TALE OF MY MOTHER."

The impression made on my mind on that hot summer day, while my mother was resting and wiping the sweat from her flushed face, was amply confirmed in my after life. On awakening to a sense of our social position as a family, I found we were not amongst those considered respectable in our neighborhood. The test of respectability consisted in having a set of mahogany drawers, an eight-day clock in a mahogany case, a holiday-shirt for the young men, and a printed dress with a large flounce for the young women. Many of the flannel weavers in our village could boast these possessions; and they held up their heads above others not so fortunate. But the real aristocracy were those who used tablecloths, had knives and forks to eat with, and displayed a muslin window-blind on a Sunday. One family had a room they called a parlor, the floor of which was covered with a carpet; a second-hand table-piano also figured largely, which was looked upon by us as a mark of great wealth and respectability. This family held quite a distinct position. None of us ever presumed to be even on speaking terms with such "great folks."

One Saturday evening I was playing with my companions, when my mother gently laid her hand on my

head and requested me to go with her into the house. I took up my marbles and quietly followed her.

"What do you want me for, mother? It is not time to go to bed yet; let me play a little longer, will you?

"I know it is soon to call you from your play; but I can not help it. Your trousers want mending, and I want to wash your shirt; for though we are poor, we ought to be clean. I intended to get you a pair of clogs, but I am not able. I am making you a pinafore out of part of a wool-sheet; it will cover your ragged clothes, and you will then look a little better."

The quiet way in which she spoke, and the sad look which accompanied her words subdued all my objections. I silently walked up stairs to allow her to begin washing and patching; and while my playfellows were still laughing and shouting in the street, I crept naked into my humble bed—not to sleep, but to think and to weep. My mind wandered far into the future that night. What air-castles I did build! I thought I grew to be a man, entered into business, made money, built a new house with a white door and brass knocker to it, planted trees around it, and had a lawn and a garden;—bought myself new clothes, and twenty shirts; bought my mother a new crimson cloak and a new bonnet, and gave her plenty of money to buy clothes for my brothers and sisters, and to get a set of mahogany drawers, an eight-day clock, and muslin curtains to the window;—I then fell asleep a man of great importance, and awoke in the morning—without a shirt!

Sunday morning ever found my mother doing all she

could to get us away in time for school. She rose the first and lighted the fire, got ready the breakfast, dressed the younger children, and helped us all. This Sunday morning I was going to have on my new "bishop," to cover my patched garments. I shall never forget that new pinafore. The wool sheets had at that time stamped on them, in large black letters, the word WOOL. My mother had got one of those old sheets as a gift from the warehouse; but it was so far worn that she could not make my pinafore without either putting on a patch, or cutting through the letters. She chose the lesser evil, thinking she could wash out the letters; but though she washed, and washed, and washed again, she could not destroy the remaining half of the word. I put my arms down the sleeves, and was stretching the front, when I saw the letters. My little spirit sank within me in bitter sorrow. I looked into my mother's face; but when I saw the tears in her eyes I instantly said,—

"Never mind, mother; never mind. It will do very well. It covers my patches; and when I get to school I will sit on the letters, and then no one will see them. Don't cry, mother; we shall be better off yet."

Away I went to the Sunday-school, with bare feet, and a pack-sheet pinafore, with half the letters WOOL down one side, to take my place in the third Bible-class, among boys who were much better dressed, and who did not like to sit beside me on that account.

I well remember the place where I sat that day;—how I put my bare feet under the form to prevent my

proud class-mates from treading on my toes,—the feeling that I was poor distressed me. But I knew that if I did not continue to go to school my mother would be grieved; and I could not bear the thought of grieving her. To think I had left her in tears made me sad; but when I saw her come to the service, and saw her look down at me from the gallery and smile, all was right again. I could smile in return, and join in singing God's praises, and hope for better days.

If ever mother understood the full meaning of those beautiful words,—"I was glad when they said, Let us go up to the house of the Lord," I believe *my* mother did. Nothing astonished me more in her character than to see her quiet, steady, Christian conduct. Yet a hundredth part of the trials she had constantly to endure would have caused thousands to sit down in hopeless sorrow. I now believe she never went to the sanctuary without a petition, for she never went without a trouble. And I also believe she left many of her troubles behind; because God fulfilled His promise in delivering her. And the day she smiled on her poor ragged boy out of the gallery I thought she smiled through her tears.

It was the custom in our Sunday-school, to give the boy who was first in the class when the bell rang for closing in the afternoon, a round tin ticket of merit, bearing a figure one. These tickets were collected once each year, and the boy having the largest number had the most valuable prize presented to him. Teachers, scholars, parents, friends, and members of the congregation assembled in the large school-room on Whit

Friday to have tea, and to witness the distribution of the prizes. One year, I had just one more ticket than any other boy in the school; and, consequently, I was entitled to receive the highest honor. The evening before that memorable day on which I was to receive my prize, I was very unhappy on account of still being without shoes or clogs, and I said to my mother, as gently as I could,—

"Mother, do you think you could get me a second-hand pair of clogs for to-morrow? I am going to have the highest prize, and shall have to go up the steps on to the platform, and I shall be ashamed to go with my bare feet."

She was darning my father's stockings when I made the request. She made no answer at the moment, but put her hand to her breast, and appeared to be suffering great pain. Oh, how I repented having spoken! I would have traveled a long way with my bare feet could I have recalled that sentence which seemed to have caused my mother such intense suffering on that night. Long was she silent; and long did I wait for the words that would express the state of her mind. At length she said,—

"I know you are going to have the first prize at the school, my child, and I have done all that I could to send you there decent. I have tried to borrow a shilling from the publican's wife, where your father takes much of his earnings, but she scorned me, and refused to lend it me. I have been to several of our neighbors to ask them to lend me the money, but our well known pov-

erty seems to have separated us from all help. There are few greater calamities in this world than to be a drunkard's wife, or a drunkard's child. I often pray that God will keep me from murmuring, and that we may have His guardian care. I do not wish to say one word against your father, and I hope none of my children ever will; for, after all, he *is* your father. Let us trust in the Lord; be good, and do good, and the light of heaven will yet shine on our path. To the godly, 'sorrow may endure for the night, but joy cometh in the morning.'"

"But we have a very near relation, mother, who dresses like a gentleman. They say he has as many Sunday waistcoats as there are months in the year. You know he called a few days since to let us look at the fine cloth he had bought for a new overcoat; and he told us he had given three guineas for it. Shall I go and ask him to lend us two shillings?"

"You may go, but I don't think you will get it; and it is two miles to his house."

Away I went. I was soon there, for I could run swiftly. But when I got to the house, my courage failed me. I stood for a long time near the door, first on one foot, and then on the other, warming them by turns with my hands; for the night was wet and cold. At length the proud man saw me, came to the door, and enquired my errand.

"Will you be so kind as to lend mother two shillings to buy me a second-hand pair of clogs? I have nothing to put on my feet, and I am going to receive my

reward to-morrow at the school. I hope you will lend it to her."

"Tell your mother that when she has paid me back the eighteen-pence she borrowed some time since, I will then talk about the two shillings, and not till then. Never mind your feet; toes were made before clogs."

On returning home, my mother saw by my countenance that I had not got the money. Our looks of sorrow met. Little was said; and I went quietly to bed.

The following day I washed my feet for a long time. I was determined that if I could not get anything to cover my ten toes, I would make them look clean. I was at the school before the time, and sat in one corner alone. Soon the people began to gather. On the platform there stood a large table, covered with a white cloth. On the cloth, the prizes were arranged with as much display as possible. Books, penknives, pocket-knives, inkstands, a small writing desk, and other valuables arrested the attention of all who entered the school. The ceremony was opened by singing a hymn. Then one of the Superintendents (the present Sir James Kay Shuttleworth,) mounted the platform, and made a speech,—eulogizing the scholars for their good conduct during the year, and holding up to view the various rewards while speaking. When he came to the first prize he called out my name, and invited me on to the platform amidst a loud clapping of hands. O, how my heart did beat! I felt at that moment as though I would have given twenty pounds, if I had possessed it, for something with which to cover my feet. I arose

from my corner, and threading my way through the people as softly as though I were a cat, I walked blushingly on to the platform, and received my reward of merit amidst the repeated clapping of the audience. But when I got back to my place I sat down and cried as though my heart would break, because I was such a poor, poor boy, and because I thought some of the other boys sneered at my poverty.

And here, though a little out of order, I will mention a circumstance that took place about twelve years after. I was then grown into a young man, and the church had determined that I should take a very important place among them. Though the incidents in my mother's life already related produced a lasting impression on me, yet I never saw her weep as she did on the following occasion. My memory will ever retain the scenes and feelings of that eventful hour. It was one Sabbath evening, my mother, as usual was seated in her pew in the house of God. The congregation was very large, and all were silently waiting for the appearance of the preacher. He, poor man, was on his knees in the vestry, praying for Divine help, and trembling with fear. One of the deacons opened the vestry door, and the young preacher rose from his knees and ascended to the pulpit. There was an elderly female among the congregation whose face was covered with her hands, and whose head was bowed in deep reverence. Large tears streamed down her pale cheeks, and her whole soul was greatly affected. That woman was my own dear mother!—and the young, trembling, timid preacher

was myself!—her once little barefooted, ragged boy —her own dear child. When I gave out the first line of the hymn, and the congregation rose to join in celebrating God's praises, my mother's head was still bowed down. Poor, dear mother—how she loved me; and yet she feared on my account. The sight of her made the tears run down my face and drop upon the Bible; it was a moment of intense emotion, and I greatly feared my strength would fail me. The events of the past came vividly up in my memory. I saw the corner where I sat on the morning I had on my pinafore made from the old pack-sheet, and the form under which I put my bare feet. But now, we had met again in the sanctuary;—she to weep for joy, and I, her son,—a sinner saved by grace and a preacher of the gospel of peace.

The combined influences producing this change of circumstances arose, principally, from two causes. My mother was a praying woman, and a consistent Christian. She did not make a loud profession, but meekly and patiently carried her heavy cross under the most grievous privations, sufferings, and persecutions. She never returned evil for evil, or railing for railing. I am perfectly amazed when I think that for forty years she should have been able to bear up under her many and severe trials without repining,—so long have drunk her very bitter cup without being driven to despair. But I have said she was a praying woman, and that explains everything. But she was obliged to pray in secret; and very often her week-night attendance at the means of grace was taken by stealth, or as fre-

quently refused with abuse. Still she held on her way amidst every storm—living a life of faith in the Son of God, and enduring to the end. Praying mothers never forget their children. The most powerful pleadings at the throne of grace are those offered by parents on behalf of their offspring. The mothers of Israel are not the only mothers who have brought their young children to Jesus.

I well remember one of my mother's prayers. It being the wakes at Rochdale I had risen early, to have a long play-day. I was not aware that any one in the house had risen before me, and was softly creeping down stairs, fearing to disturb any of the family, when I heard a low voice. I sat down on the steps to listen. It was my mother's voice; and she was praying for all her children by name. I leaned forward, and held my breath lest I should miss one word. I heard her say, "Lord, bless John; keep him from bad company, and make him a good and useful man." Her words went to my young heart; and they are ringing in my ears to this hour. "Lord, bless John." That short prayer, uttered by my mother when she thought no one heard her but God, has been to me a precious legacy.

Another influence for good has arisen from my attending regularly at Sunday-school. From the first day I went, to the day I am writing this narrative, I have never left the Sabbath-school; and I have had tens of thousands of blessings as a consequence. I have risen, step by step, from the alphabet class to the Superintendent's desk, and from that to the pulpit. The

Sabbath-school has been a blessing to millions, but to none more than myself. The twelve boys who composed our class at my first Sunday-school made a vow never to leave—promising each other that they would work conjointly in the school so long as they lived. Only two out of the twelve have kept their vow; and only those two have prospered in this world. Five, out of the ten who left, have died the drunkard's death. A mother's prayers and the Sunday-school have been my safeguard and blessing.

The air-built castles of the night I went to bed a little boy without a shirt have been, to some extent, realized. The house, the garden with the trees around, are now real facts; but nothing has given me greater pleasure than Providence enabling me to help my dear parents in their old age. Once every fortnight for many years I went to see them, and on one of these visits, on enquiring for my father, my dear mother informed me he was gone into a neighboring wood. On going to join him, I found him engaged in prayer. I stepped back for fear of disturbing him, and ran home to tell my mother. She smiled through her tears, saying: "Our prayers are heard at last, and my sun is now setting in a clear sky."

I never heard my mother speak an unkind word to a beggar. She had but little to give them, but she always spoke kindly; nor was she ever known to differ with her neighbors. All of them brought her their troubles, for she was full of pity for all in distress,—her own experience taught her to sympathize with the sorrowful

I once told her I thought her religion was of a very quiet description, something like that of the Friends. Her answer was: "I have found the church has always been the most disturbed with its loudest professors, and that little talkers are often the best workers." No doubt my mother's observation and experience led her to the above conclusions; yet it does not hold good in every case. There are many great talkers who are good workers. Constitutional temperament has much to do with talking, either much or little.

The minister and elders of the church of which my mother was a member held her in the highest esteem, and on her leaving them to join the church above, ordered for her a funeral sermon. Eight sons and daughters were present on that mournful occasion, and now the remains of both my parents repose in the burying ground belonging to Bamford Chapel: my father, aged seventy five,—and mother, seventy-seven. Sacred is that place to me, and never do I stand beside that hallowed spot, but I thank God for a meek, patient, PRAYING MOTHER!